

COMPETING ETHICAL SYSTEMS

By James Hitchcock

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Dr. Hitchcock delivered this presentation at Hillsdale during the launching of the College's Christian Studies Program.

Through much of its history America has been assumed to be a religious nation, and indeed a good deal of the time a Christian nation. God has been invoked with great regularity by public officials, by politicians seeking to become public officials, on money, and in many other contexts. If much of this religiosity has been superficial and even sometimes hypocritical, it has nonetheless expressed the aspirations of probably the vast majority of Americans over the past two centuries.

This religiosity reached its peak just prior to 1960. Quasi-official public ideology in the 1950s regarded religious belief and religious worship as self-evidently good things. Americans were exhorted to "go to church on Sunday," without much regard for which church or why. To be thought a non-believer, or even a non-churchgoer, could be damaging to a public figure's career. The major organs of communication, like the Luce publications, supported religion as essential to the well being of the nation.



There also existed, until sometime after 1960, a fairly broad moral consensus. People routinely referred to the "Judeo-Christian ethic" as a foundation on which belief and behavior could be based. While there were inevitable disagreements over values, in retrospect these seem to have been relatively minor in scope, occurring within an accepted framework of belief. To cite one particularly sensitive example, the nation was overwhelmingly family-oriented. Hence there was general agreement about the undesirability of divorce, unmarried cohabitation, homosexuality, and other practices. However common they may have been in actuality, there was little inclination to defend them in theory. Agencies of public expression, like the schools and the mass media, tended overwhelmingly to honor this moral consensus.

During the past twenty years, and especially since the late 1960s, there has occurred a radical shattering of

im•pri•mis (im-pri-mis) adv. In the first place. Middle English, from Latin *in primis*, among the first (things).

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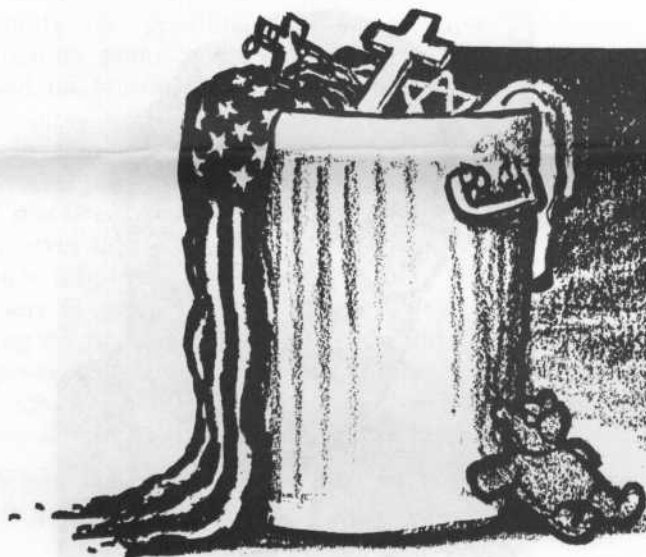
the broad moral consensus which formerly existed. This shattering came about with remarkable swiftness, leaving a society with practically no moral consensus on basic values.

Superficially this may seem merely a natural and desirable development of the phenomenon of democratic pluralism. In a democracy no set of values may be imposed on anyone, all values are entitled to expression, and the aim of public policy is to maximize the freedom of expression enjoyed by each particular "point of view."

This "new pluralism" is also extolled as a wholly

orthodoxy which loses its authority has trouble even retaining the right of toleration. Although it is still extended bare legal toleration, in practice it finds itself more and more on the defensive, its very right to exist challenged in numerous ways.

The most obvious instance of this is in the mass media. Here the reigning pieties of twenty years ago—religion, capitalism, patriotism, the family—find themselves subject to relentless attack. "News" coverage emphasizes obsessively the problems associated with all these traditional institutions. They are habitually represented as dying, and as dying because they are



benign phenomenon, a situation in which the state remains scrupulously neutral, all movements enjoy an equality of expression, and a multiplicity of values interact with one another. Demands by any particular group or idea for favored treatment constitute a violation of democratic courtesy. The fragmentation of values is viewed positively, as simply bringing about greater variety and multiplicity in the world.

However, as the English historian E. R. Norman has observed, "pluralism" is a word society employs during the transition from one orthodoxy to another. In practice it proves to be extraordinarily difficult to maintain genuine equality between "all points of view," even if it were possible to determine what "all" such points of view really are. A society cannot remain permanently fragmented with respect to values. Public policies of various kinds require decisions which inevitably reflect values. Hence value judgments must be made, whether or not this fact is publicly acknowledged. Each time such a judgment is made, one set of values is inevitably preferred over another set. Someone's beliefs are favored at the expense of someone else's.

While the call for "pluralism" is ostensibly merely a call for tolerance—a request that the reigning orthodoxy make room for newer "points of view"—in practice an

rigid, sclerotic, and atavistic, their only hopes for survival based on their ability to change beyond all recognition. (Thus the family will survive, we are told, but only if we understand it as any group of people living in the same dwelling.) In those areas of the media which purport to be merely entertainment the powerful weapon of ridicule is constantly directed at traditional values and those who espouse them. Such people are routinely depicted as insecure, stupid, neurotic, and ridiculous. In television fiction, for example, religion is often shown as a deforming influence, rarely as a positive and supportive element in people's lives. Religious believers are either hypocrites or fanatics.

The same bias is increasingly reflected in other powerful social agencies, especially those controlled by the government. Consider, for example, the public schools. Officially neutral as to values, they increasingly are based on secular humanist assumptions which are actively inimical to religious values. The courts and school bureaucracies are obsessively vigilant against the least sign of "sectarian" influence in the schools—not so much as the whisper of a prayer, a reading from Scripture, or a reverential mention of God is permitted. Recent decisions have even forbidden students to use school property for private religious meetings. Mean-

while, however, the concept of academic freedom is simultaneously expanded to permit, even in some cases to require, the expression of all kinds of "controversial" political and social opinions, some of which are profoundly inimical to the parents of students in the schools.

This model of "neutral" state schools soon becomes an unacknowledged model for various private institutions which are not required by law to exclude religion from their purview but easily fall into the habit of thinking that religion is merely "private" and "divisive." Thus recently one large business corporation,

Government agencies of all kinds profess a now similar "neutrality" about religion, which in practice often turns out to be hostility. The principle of separation of church and state is so dogmatically, even fanatically, applied that religious believers are in effect excluded from full rights of citizenship. This becomes especially critical as these government agencies move toward usurping more and more of the authority traditionally vested in the family, and do so in accord with frankly secular and sometimes overtly anti-religious values.

Much of this process can be associated with a phe-



having actively promoted Transcendental Meditation among its employees, refused to distribute an evangelical Christian magazine which those same employees were offered free, on the grounds that to do so would be to offend those who were not practicing Christians.

The stock defense of excluding all religion from the public schools is that religion should be learned in the home and in church. This misses the point, however, that in modern American society virtually everything which is deemed worth learning—from patriotism to first aid—sooner or later finds its way into the school curriculum. When something is definitely excluded from the school, impressionable children and young people have difficulty not assuming that it is either false or unimportant. Religious liberty is severely curtailed, in that religion is defined as something one is free to practice strictly in private but which has no legitimate public expression. (Thus, as in the 1980 election, the cry is continually raised that religion is "meddling" in politics. There have even been court cases, supported by established organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union, which would invalidate any legislation shown to have been enacted under "sectarian" influence. So far the courts have rejected this argument, but no one can predict that they will continue to do so.)

nomenon which has been called the "new class." The term refers to people (increasingly women as well as men) who are relatively well educated, affluent, and socially mobile and who tend to gravitate toward professions like law, government, journalism, and academic life. They enjoy an increasing degree of control over the most important agencies of public opinion and to a degree of the formation of public policy. These people tend to be very secular in outlook, impatient of traditional morality, experimental in personal lifestyle, and often hostile to religion and the values associated with it. They are now personal carriers of a kind of militantly secularist bias.

If the situation now existing in America were simply one of a militant secularism on the one hand confronting an equally aggressive organized religion on the other, there would be little cause for concern. The religious instincts of the American people are probably still so strong that in such a contest secularism would lose. However, in terms of the dialectic previously alluded to, religion now finds itself on the defensive but does not defend itself. Victories go to its enemies frequently by default. Many Christians are tremendously complacent and locked into the kind of privatism which secularity seeks to promote. So long as their immediate world is not disturbed—they can continue to attend

their church services or their prayer meetings—they pay little attention to what is going on in the larger world. Many are emotionally unprepared to admit that they are in a diminishing minority so far as public expression of values is concerned. They seem constitutionally incapable of accepting the role of being on the defensive. They hope that somehow their problems will be solved for them.

The so-called "mainline" churches in fact aid and abet the process of secularization rather than oppose it. Many of their clergy, their national bureaucrats, their prominent lay people appear themselves to be highly secular in outlook, their religiosity either a hangover from the past or else a mere facade for promoting secular causes. The impact of the new class has hit the churches hard, and many church leaders seem to want nothing so much as to fit easily and unobtrusively into the new secularist consensus which they see being created.

Internal confusion is rife within the churches. Doctrine, whether concerning traditional beliefs like the divinity of Christ or concerning moral behavior, is treated as unimportant, and in some churches theologians have worked for years to undermine whatever certainty exists on doctrinal matters. This confusion extends now to many of the people in the pews, who may vaguely feel that there is something wrong in society but cannot really judge what it is because they lack the educated faith to do so. They are also continually being told by their ostensible spiritual leaders that things which cause them unease (like the "gay rights" movement) are really to be welcomed.

Meanwhile a religious revival of sorts is taking place, the strength and scope of which remains as yet uncertain. Pope John Paul II offers powerful leadership toward the reconstruction of Catholicism. However, in America the most significant form of this revival is among the evangelical Protestants, who show a new cohesiveness, a new militancy, and in some cases a new sophistication. Quite predictably, this newly generated evangelical aggressiveness has stirred anger and panic in those who had assumed that secularism had the public arena all to itself. Suddenly there are warnings, some of them emanating from high church circles, about mixing religion and politics, from people who had no objection at all so long as religion was supporting the secularist political agenda.

Many Christians, however, are slow to learn the lesson that the very nature of a democratic, pluralistic society implies conflict. Deferential about their own interests, they prefer to dissolve all genuine disagreements in what has been characterized as a wordy torrent of good will. Starting from the shallowly "ecumenical" assumption that all differences can ultimately be ironed out, they allow their enemies (the term is not too strong) to win victory after victory over them. Although they speak reverentially about pluralism, they

persist in misunderstanding its nature. Rather than a system in which diverse groups mute their differences in the interests of mutual harmony, pluralism is a system in which diverse groups push their own interests strongly and persistently. In a pluralistic society no group is taken seriously until it proves its ability to command social power. But social power is something many Christians seem to regard as inherently evil.

The most sensitive areas where competing ethical systems clash are sex and the family, which are obviously related to one another in certain very intimate ways.

It is often claimed that traditional Christianity over-emphasized sexual morality, especially at the expense of "social morality" or considerations of justice. Whether or not this is true, it is the case, however, that a concern with sexual morality, or with sexual behavior, is not likely to go away, no matter how "liberated" society becomes. The reason for this is the fact, at least dimly recognized by everybody, that sexual behavior is very close to the heart of one's personality. How we behave sexually, perhaps even more how we think about how we behave, does a great deal to define who we are. In the "sexual revolution" of the past fifteen years, many an individual has undergone an almost complete personality change as a result of sexual adventuring which marked a radical departure from previous standards of behavior.

Certain proponents of the sexual revolution therefore know exactly what they are doing when they promote it, for they realize that if people of traditional values can be made to change their minds (not even, necessarily, their behavior) on this matter, they will prove easily malleable in other areas as well. The assault on traditional Christian sexual morality is an attempt to shatter all deeply held, uncompromisable moral convictions, to make people into perfectly mobile, infinitely manipulable creatures.

Secularism has also chosen to assault Christianity on the point of sexual ethics because it calculates that Christianity is most vulnerable there. The spirit of hedonism which has arisen in American society, perhaps primarily as a result of thirty-five years of continually rising prosperity, has induced in many people a sense that they have a "right" to the fulfillment of every personal desire. Thus every moral rule, especially one cast as "Thou shalt not," is treated as an intolerable interference with personal liberty. Shrewd secularists have calculated that the maximum amount of resentment can be aroused against Christianity precisely at the point of its sexual teachings. Christians who endeavor to deflect this attack by modifying or even abandoning that teaching merely compound the problem, because they seem to admit that the churches have indeed always taught false and deforming doctrines, just as their critics charge.

No one in the least sensitive to the contemporary moral and political climate can doubt that the family is under strong attack. It is an attack which comes from several different directions, for in one form it comes from people who are themselves family members (parents, for example) but who are eager to be relieved of family responsibilities. The ethic of "do your own thing" first had devastating effects on the attitude of children toward their parents, then on the attitudes of parents toward children. There is no lack of people in influential positions in government and private social agencies who are eager to assume responsibility for the well being of children, to take upon themselves (or, more precisely, on the agencies they represent) the responsibilities which parents either no longer want or are deemed incapable of assuming.

This attack on the family is often cloaked with blandishments—the public agency offers the beleaguered parent relief from heavy burdens, or offers the child a wider, more comprehensive experience of the world than the narrow provincialism of family life can provide. But at bottom it is an attack motivated by the conviction that the family is a bad institution, one which restricts and limits its members and from which they must be liberated.

In this context the family is also recognized as an institution which provides the individual with the maximum possible zone of privacy, something which in itself is deemed a bad thing. Even more than the church, the family is the vehicle by which traditional moral values are preserved and handed on. It is the means by which they are enabled to live lives quite at variance, often enough, with general social trends. Family and religious loyalties, tenaciously held to, are the maximum possible source of resistance to any kind of social or political totalitarianism. Thus to those who would use public policy to impose a new ethical universality, the family can only be an obstacle, to be attacked and undermined in every way possible. (Ironically, the White House Conference on Families of 1980, ostensibly called to help the family, was in fact a further step in undermining it.)

The brilliance of the secularist strategy lies precisely in the fact that it attacks on all fronts simultaneously. If the attack on traditional values proceeded piecemeal, each such assault would be isolated and made to seem bizarre and incredible. In the past this has often been the fate of social radicals who mounted a campaign before their time. However, if all traditional values are attacked simultaneously—religion, family, patriotism, etc.—each particular assault gains credibility. All familiar signposts are obliterated at the same time, and the confusion makes the rediscovery of any particular one more difficult. There can be no compelling defense of any challenged belief because the assumptions on which such a defense might be made are also under attack. Believers in traditional values are likely to

withdraw in confusion and demoralization.

In a sense underlying all of these specific iconoclastic movements, although also in a sense an outgrowth of them, is the so-called "human potential" movement—the great potpourri of ideas and pseudo-ideas which promise people that they will discover their "true selves," that they will experience unlimited "growth," that they will "get in touch" with themselves. It includes a countless variety of nostrums, including Transcendental Meditation, EST, encounter groups, and what is broadly called humanistic psychology.

In the end the human potential movement is destructive of all personal relationships and of all settled values. By encouraging people to think of themselves as possessing limitless possibilities, and by encouraging them also to believe that they have obligations only toward themselves, it makes life essentially a series of adventures, oriented solely to the personal gratification of the individual. All permanent social relationships, including all personal commitments, can only be regarded as confining and retarding.

It must be realized that the shattering of familiar bonds like those of the family is not merely a historical accident, a possibly unwanted and unanticipated by-product of other, more benign developments. Among some people at least, the attack on these values is deliberate and calculated. Two forces in particular are correctly perceived as formidable, indeed insurmountable, obstacles to a wholly secularized world—religion and the family. Thus both must be systematically assaulted and undermined. Every taboo must be shattered, the more sacred the taboo the more compulsive the shattering. It is again no accident that avant-garde moral opinion now concentrates on the most ancient and most terrible of all taboos, that against incest. So long as even a single moral absolute is allowed to stand, the wholly secularized and relativized society which the revolutionaries aim at will fall short of completion.

With regard to each previously held absolute a predictable pattern is followed—first unthinkable thoughts are expressed publicly, in the media and elsewhere, justified on the grounds of free speech and the need to hear "all points of view." Then certain respectable people—clergy, professors, judges, etc.—announce that such ideas must be taken seriously, even if not approved. The "rigidity" of past beliefs is scored, to the point where those who hold to traditional opinions are made to feel slightly guilty. Finally a few respectable individuals proclaim publicly their acceptance of the new idea. Within an amazingly brief period of time what had been unthinkable becomes quite thinkable, then becomes a new orthodoxy. Those who hold to the old idea are quickly placed in the position of being eccentric and in need of justification. (Thus in some circles those who disapprove of homosexuality are

placed in the defensive position once occupied by homosexuals themselves, whose public stance becomes more and more aggressive.)

A major aim of the moral revolution is to abolish all guilt, which amounts in practice to abolishing all sense of moral responsibility. The new sensibility will feel perfectly free only when the very possibility of moral disapproval, whether expressed from the outside or from one's own conscience, has been eliminated. The human will must be made to stand wholly sovereign, free of all restriction. The self-defining self must be made sovereign.

For centuries men have debated the question whether morality is possible without religion. Although numerous philosophers have offered ethical systems based on reason alone, in practice such systems are difficult to implement. However persuasive they may be in the abstract (and none has ever commanded universal persuasiveness), in practice they do not affect the practical behavior of the majority of people. There has never been a society in the history of the world in which religion was not a dominating force, and our society is now seemingly attempting the experience of being the first. But there is no historical evidence that it is possible to have such a society. The elementary rules of behavior which make civilized existence possible seem always to depend on religious authority.

When Christians are accused of trying to impose their morality on others, it is appropriate to reply first

that Christian beliefs have as much right to be heard in the public arena as any other. But beyond this it is also appropriate to inquire what alternative source of morality is being proffered. Secularism at present thrives on its ability to undermine traditional beliefs. It has offered no proof of its ability to construct a new ethic.

The attack on religion is often mounted, now and in the past, in the name of mankind—the substitution of a supposedly “humanistic” perspective in place of a theistic one. But it is also worth noting that the advance of this so-called “humanism” is accompanied by growing and sometimes quite violent assaults on humanity itself. Pornography, to take merely one example of a phenomenon which has become a sacred cause to many who profess to believe in human liberty, reveals a disgust, indeed a hatred, of the human body and of humanity in general which could scarcely be equalled in the annals of the world. There is now serious discussion in philosophical circles whether human beings should indeed be considered superior to lower animal forms. Both the new secularism and certain forms of the new religiosity show a fanatic desire to collapse man back into nature, the obliteration of human identity in a featureless, pseudo-mystical mass.

What is at stake today is not merely the survival of particular denominational forms or of once privileged dogmas. What is at stake is the survival of all values and of any kind of belief. Finally what is at stake is the survival of humanity.

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